



EDUCATION, EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER CHOICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between education, employability, and career choices among young people in Nigeria, a critical issue in the country today. Education is widely recognized as a key driver of national growth and development, equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in society. It enables beneficiaries to make informed career decisions, develop employability skills, and achieve success in life. The study explores the concept of Universal Basic Education (UBE), the employability skills of Nigerian school leavers, and the role of schools in shaping students' career choices. It adopts the Triple Helix Innovation Model, which emphasizes collaboration between academia, industry, and government. This model advocates for stronger integration and partnerships among educational institutions, industrial organizations, and government agencies to enhance career readiness and employment opportunities. The paper concludes with policy implications to improving education and employability outcomes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Education, Employability, Skills, Career Choice.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, launched in September 1999 under President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, was introduced to create a more functional and relevant educational system aligned with the country's socio-economic, political, and cultural needs. It also aimed to address the challenges and failures of previous education programs. While every educational policy is designed to foster national development and empower youth, effective implementation remains a significant challenge.

A functional education system imparts essential values, skills, and knowledge through structured programs that equip learners with the competencies needed for national development (Ochoyi & Danladi, 2008). However, Nigeria's education system has been criticized for lacking quality and job-related training (Adeyanju, 2010). Scholars define functional education as one that prioritizes scientific and technological advancement, self-employment, self-reliance,

nation-building, job performance, competency, employability skills, and lifelong learning (Akubuito, 2008). According to Fafunwa (1986), qualitative education is inherently functional, serving as the foundation for human and national development.

Despite the implementation of UBE, significant gaps remain in basic education, employability, and career opportunities for Nigerian youth. Youth unemployment is alarmingly high, with many young people neither engaged in education nor gainful employment. Akande (2014) reported that 11.1 million Nigerians aged 15 to 34 were unemployed, with more than half of youth aged 15–24 having no education beyond primary school. Furthermore, those without secondary education constitute over 50% of all unemployed youths. Even graduates from tertiary institutions face severe unemployment, with about 20% remaining jobless for up to five years post-graduation.

The growing emphasis on employability as a critical factor in labor market success and national economic development underscores the importance of informed career choices. Schools, through career guidance counsellors, play a crucial role in providing students with effective career guidance. Policymakers must recognize the necessity of career counseling in education to enhance employability outcomes. Improving young people's life opportunities and driving economic growth require the acquisition of employability skills through a functional and qualitative basic education system.

Career guidance, counselling, and mentoring serve as vital tools for students, helping them navigate career choices, develop essential skills, and become productive members of society. The Nigerian education system aims to provide free, compulsory, and universal basic education that equips school leavers with the literacy and skills needed to confidently face contemporary life challenges, succeed in the workplace, and engage effectively in social interactions. However, despite years of UBE implementation, Nigeria still struggles with low functional literacy rates among its youth. UNESCO (2012) reported that literacy rates in Nigeria vary based on gender and geographical location, further highlighting the need for a more effective educational system.

Review

A good number of scholars and studies have approached the issues of the Nigerian basic education in terms of the knowledge acquired, employability and career choice of the learners who are the beneficiaries of the system.

This is the education with the aims and objectives of providing free and compulsory basic education for every Nigerian child aged 6 to 15 years. Knowing fully well that education is one of the vital tools for national development, the Federal Government of Nigeria under President Olusegun Obasanjo, in September 1999, ahead of the 2000 Dakar World Forum of Education For All (EFA), launched this system of education with the aim of achieving the following objectives:

- The development of the entire citizens with a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
- The provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age.
- Reducing the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system.

Catering for the learning needs of young persons, who for one reason or another had their education interrupted, through appropriate form of complimentary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education. Ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills, as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation. These objectives are in line with the Federal

government policy on education (National Policy on Education, 2014) which stated that: Formal basic education encompassing the first nine years of school, which include primary and junior school education for all school-age children of pastoral nomads and migrant fishermen as well as non-formal education for out of school children, youths and illiterate adults. The universal basic education is a policy initiated by the Federal government as a step to meeting number 2 goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which was adopted by the international community in the year 2000. MDG proposed that by 2015 all children of school age should have free, affordable and accessible education. Universal education means a programme that is meant for all members of the society which include the rich and the poor, the physically fit and the physically challenged, the intelligent and the dull, boys and girls, the regular students and the school dropouts and every other individual that is ready to acquire knowledge. The term basic means that it is fundamental or important, showing that education is the beginning of the acquisition of knowledge by all citizens. It is that type of education that can assist an individual to function effectively in the society (Adewole, 2003). It is also seen as a practical and functional education that is expected to equip learners with the required skills to survive in their environment. It is an education that will lay a solid foundation for scientific and reflective thinking, character and moral upbringing, development of right attitude in the child and the ability to adapt to his changing environment. Even on the national economy, it will increase the gross domestic product by increase in employment and reduce social vices resulting from unemployment. In the implementation guideline of UBE, a commission was set up to ensure the smooth and effective running of the programme throughout the federation. The UBE programme was not instituted for only school-age children but also to take care of the educational needs of young people and adults who have not had the privilege to acquire education at young age. The right to education by citizens of school age in Nigeria has witnessed a renewed determination by the government to achieve this well before 2015. As Obasanjo (2006:1) puts it; "Educating a child is closing the prison gates". The strength of Education for All (EFA) cannot be overemphasized as the future of the child and nation at large depends on educational benefits.

The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) reaffirms the Nigerian government's commitment to Education for All (EFA) and the provision of quality basic education for all citizens. Each educational policy introduced in Nigeria has emphasized the importance of universal, functional, and qualitative education. However, for the objectives of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme to be fully realized, a collaborative effort is required from the government and all stakeholders in the education sector (Olanrewaju, 2019). The success of mass education hinges on

the collective engagement of the three tiers of government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private individuals, and international organizations in providing the necessary human and material resources (Adelabu & Akinwumi, 2021).

The government must ensure adequate funding for constructing new school buildings, maintaining existing structures, and supplying essential teaching and learning materials such as textbooks, desks, chairs, chalkboards, and audiovisual aids (Adebayo, 2022). However, funding and implementation are not the sole responsibilities of the government. International donor agencies, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have played critical roles in supporting the UBE programme (Odukoya & Adeyemo, 2020).

The recruitment, training, and retention of qualified teachers are crucial to the effective implementation of the UBE programme. Kabiru (2017) noted that teachers hold the key to unlocking modernization and national development through education. Similarly, Akilaya (2018) asserted that only well-trained and motivated teachers can ensure the delivery of quality education.

A critical evaluation of the UBE programme in Nigeria raises the question of whether its stated goals and objectives have been met. Odo (2015) provided an overview of the principles, challenges, and prospects of the programme, highlighting its international origins and local adaptations. He identified key obstacles to its success, including inadequate institutional frameworks for data collection, politicization of statistics, insufficient governmental capacity for policy execution, gaps in civil society engagement, ineffective private sector involvement, and unfulfilled donor commitments (Eze & Okafor, 2019).

The legal framework for UBE in Nigeria is grounded in Section 18, Subsections 1 and 3 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which mandates free and compulsory basic education for children of primary and junior secondary school age. The UBE Act (2004) further empowers the federal government to assist state and local governments in ensuring a standardized and qualitative basic education system (FRN, 2004; Aina, 2021). The Act also established the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) at the federal level, with corresponding State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) and Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) at the sub national levels to oversee programme implementation (Ogunyemi, 2020).

Despite the legal framework and the delineation of responsibilities among stakeholders, funding remains a major

challenge to the effective execution of the UBE scheme (Nwosu & Chukwu, 2022). Corruption, embezzlement, poor supervision, and inadequate monitoring have hindered the programme's success. Although the policy stipulates that basic education should be free, parents are often required to contribute financially (Onwubiko, 2019). Additionally, Tahiri (2020) identified challenges such as overstretched facilities, a surge in school enrollments, rigid curricula, a shortage of schools, and inadequate teacher supervision.

Mbakwem and Asiabaka (2021) expressed concerns over the poor physical state of school infrastructure, citing dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, unhygienic sanitation facilities, and insufficient laboratories and workshops. Ajayi (2018) echoed similar sentiments, noting that many schools suffer from overpopulation, insufficient desks, and a high number of unqualified and demotivated teachers.

Given the current state of the UBE programme, achieving its objectives remains a distant goal. However, if properly implemented, UBE has the potential to improve the quality of education in Nigeria, contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), create employment opportunities, reduce crime rates, mitigate child labor, promote gender equality in schools, alleviate poverty, and encourage school enrollment (Okonkwo & Yusuf, 2021). Strengthening institutional frameworks, increasing funding, enhancing teacher training, and improving infrastructure are imperative for realizing the full potential of the UBE programme in Nigeria.

Employability and Career Choice

Employability encompasses an individual's capacity to secure and maintain meaningful employment, influenced by personal circumstances and labour market dynamics. It extends beyond merely obtaining a job; it involves cultivating the appropriate attitudes, experiences, and skills that enable individuals to not only secure employment but also advance in their chosen careers. This perspective emphasizes the development of critical and reflective abilities, aiming to equip students with the necessary competencies to deliver results effectively. In the Nigerian context, there is a pressing need to invest significantly in education systems that prioritize work experience and the acquisition of employability skills. Studies indicate that Nigerian graduates often lack essential skills required by employers, suggesting a disconnect between the education system and labor market demands. This skills gap contributes to the high unemployment rates among Nigerian youth, which stood at 42.5% as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics. To address this issue, integrating employability skills into the school curriculum is crucial. Emphasizing technical and vocational education can prepare students with the practical skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for gainful employment. The Nigerian National Policy on Education

highlights the importance of vocational education in promoting the acquisition of hands-on skills and applied scientific knowledge.

Recent initiatives have been launched to enhance graduate employability. The Nigeria Jubilee Fellows Programme (NJFP), for instance, is a federal government initiative co-funded by the European Union and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme. It aims to improve the employability of fresh graduates by connecting them to practical on-the-job skills through a 12-month paid placement in both private and public sector institutions across the country.

Furthermore, the National Universities Commission (NUC) has partnered with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to tackle challenges related to graduate employability and entrepreneurial skills development. This collaboration focuses on developing and implementing a national framework and strategies to enhance graduate employability within Nigeria's higher education sector. Improving the employability skills of graduates is imperative for reducing unemployment and fostering economic growth in Nigeria. By aligning educational programs with labor market needs and providing practical training opportunities, Nigeria can better prepare its youth for the demands of the modern workforce.

Career Choice of Students

A career may be taken as sequence of occupation, job and positions held during the course of life. Making a career choice in this era of science, information technology and industrialization has become very complex for an average schoolchild. To make a right career choice, a careful planning and career exploration are needed. It will help to meet the needs of the ever-evolving socio-economic situation of the world. There is also the need for adequate knowledge and information about occupational opportunities and the world of work to make a good career choice. Today, career choices are influenced by a number of factors which include but not limited to personality, interests, self-concept, educational system and policies, school environment, culture, parents' characteristics/pressure, peer influence, socialization and globalization. Therefore, it means that there is need for functional and effective school guidance/counselling programmes to give appropriate career guidance and counselling to students. Furthermore, because of educational, economic, technological, social and ideological changes of today's world, every student has the need to be properly guided by qualified school counsellors in the choice of his/her career. Fortunately enough, the UBE scheme gives opportunity for a school child to make a good career choice early in life with the assistance of career guidance counsellors in schools. The current educational system in Nigeria is intended that students after the basic school years, i.e., after Junior Secondary School Class 3 can decide the kind of

career to go into in life. It is expected that a child's performance in key subjects in addition to his/her interest, personality, aptitudes and abilities in junior secondary school will determine the class he/she will be placed in the senior secondary school. On the other hand, he or she may be sent to the technical school to acquire a skill. Sometimes, the young JSS 3 school leaver is sent to learn a trade/skill in an informal training centre. Making a good career choice also means building a good manpower for the economic growth and development of the country. The manpower of a country is therefore developed when there are programmes and activities designed in the school system and training institutions to transform people in such a way that they will contribute meaningfully to the social and economic growth and development of the country and the world at large (Okoroafor & Nwankwo as cited in Ogbodo, 2015). Career education, as an element of manpower development, is an essential thing in human life as it affects man from childhood to adulthood. A successful career choice is enhanced through education, which involves getting information, knowledge, skills and guidance. According to Akinboye as cited in Onwubolu (2009), career/vocational education is important in the lives of youths because it aids them in the process of growth and development, learning, acquisition of skills and knowledge that prepares them for vocation, work, career and survival. When a good career choice is made, employability and survival is ensured. In choosing a career, it is important to know how students develop their preferences for one occupation or the other and how these preferences are implemented. Parents, teachers and counsellors ought to be familiar with the major factors which influence vocational development of individuals. The present system of education curriculum for senior secondary school preaches about career entrepreneurship/trade education, which means short-term skills to make youths employable. The influences of education, technology, modernization, division of labour, use of scientific equipment era have initiated a wide range of career choices.

Consequently, this requires that youths be given good career guidance and counselling in schools. According to Egbule (2002), when proper career education is given to students, it helps them to understand themselves in terms of the irabilities, interests and aptitudes, gives a broader view about the world of work, enhances awareness of various options available or open to them, and ultimately, builds the confidence needed to make a reasonable choice between the various options. It develops in them the spirit of job satisfaction, motivation and self-actualization as they progress in their choice of career. To achieve these, different approaches are adopted in schools. They include but are not limited to: subject teaching approaches and use of career guidance programmes and activities. In the course of the above activities and programmes, it is advocated that school counsellors, career educationists and the teachers should keep a proper record of their students which would be used to

carefully guide their choice of subjects in the secondary school leading to choice of career later in life. There is need to pay attention to the provision of career/vocational guidance services in schools as has been stated in the National Policy on Education (2004). Guidance counselors should be supported and motivated to actively perform their roles in the Nigerian educational system at all levels.

Theoretically, this paper is hinged on the Triple Helix III Model developed by Etzkowitz and Leydersdorff (1995). The model discusses learning, innovative strategies, the integration and strengthening of the relationship among the school, the industry and the government for the purpose of promoting national economic growth and development. Triple Helix Model emphasizes the strong interaction that exists between the university as the main point of action and activities in terms of academic based research and development activities, the industry as the service providers of customers' needs and the government as the policy maker. The Model is referred to in this paper because, it gives a summary of the role of the academia, the industry and the government in the empowerment and development of the learners to be able to gain employability skills, make good career choices and live productive lives. The model proposes that the solution to economic crisis is innovative ventures among the education sector, industrial sector and the government. For our students and graduates to be well equipped with the right knowledge and information to make good career choices and develop employability skills, the three sectors must work together. The extent to which the government, the academia and the industry collaborate to bring about creativity, innovation and development determines how functional the educational system will be. The Triple Helix Model considers the government, the school and industry as having equal importance in the country's innovation network. Conclusion and

Policy Implications

Education, employability, and career choices for Nigerian youths require a collaborative effort among stakeholders in education, industry, and government to ensure the functionality of the educational system in achieving the objectives outlined in the National Policy on Education. Investing in education that prioritizes work experience, employability skills, and innovation will create job opportunities and enhance career prospects for youths both within and outside Nigeria. The implementation of the Triple Helix Model, which fosters collaboration among these three sectors, will undoubtedly strengthen the nation's economy. Therefore, it is essential to supervise and monitor the Nigerian educational system to align it with the country's development goals. Additionally, stronger partnerships should be established between schools, industries, and the government to enhance practical learning experiences.

Adequate provisions must be made for students, particularly at the tertiary level, to engage in meaningful industrial training before graduation. Furthermore, career guidance and counseling programs should be well-supported, supervised, and effectively implemented in schools. Finally, the Universal Basic Education scheme should receive adequate funding, regular monitoring, and periodic evaluation to ensure its effectiveness at all levels.

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